



## CASE STUDY

# Cameroon: Challenges in Kumbo community to improve water supply management



## Summary

The Kumbo water supply system has always had contested ownership claims. After decades of protest, action was taken and management was transferred to Kumbo Urban Council, resulting in the establishment of an inclusive and participatory community water governance structure. The lesson can be learnt that the command and control paradigm can provoke social and political instability. The case demonstrates how community based platforms can enhance community mobilisation and participatory governance.

## Background

The Kumbo water supply system initiated in the late 1960's and completed in 1972 has a complex ownership claim. On the one hand, it is claimed to be a Nso community water scheme realised with the financial support of the people of Canada through the efforts of an elite of Nso. Others consider it as a government-owned scheme considering the provisions of the national legislation relating to water supply, and the technical and diplomatic role of the Government of Cameroon in the construction and mobilization of financial resources from the Canadian government. In 1984, a presidential decree institutionalised state operation of all urban water supply systems under the then Cameroon National Water Corporation (French abbreviation SNEC). It would appear this paradigm was of concern to several individuals due to non-involvement of locals in the management structure of SNEC. However, the real trouble started when the Kumbo Council was billed for water consumed at public standpipes. This was compounded by the subsequent disconnection of over 60 public standpipes and what the Nso people considered as deteriorating services, and escalating water tariffs which forced the citizenry to return to unprotected stream sources for their daily water needs. There has also existed for over thirty years a conflict over the use of catchment area by the locals and the

municipal water supply system management. This has been principally due to the forceful ejection of the locals from their farmland by the paramount traditional authorities.

## **Actions taken**

In April of 1991, in the light of the political upheavals in the Cameroon, a locally orchestrated campaign led to the forceful expulsion of the Cameroon National Water Corporation (SNEC) from Kumbo in October of 1991. A community based local institution, the Kumbo Water Authority (KWA), under the chairmanship of the traditional ruler, with support from the elites, was created to manage the Kumbo Water Supply. The duties of the Kumbo Water Authority (KWA) were:

1. Collection, treatment, storage and distribution of potable water to the population
2. Billing, revenue collection, operation, maintenance and network extension
3. Source water protection and water quality monitoring to ensure compliance with WHO

standards - the standards applicable in Cameroon

4. Source funding opportunities and establish local, national and international partnerships for capacity building and material support for improved performance

This structure had problems of legality (in the light of national legislation for water management) that were compounded by regular conflicts in, and a litigation case over the catchment area that threatened the sustainability of Kumbo municipal water supply. Thus, following the 2004 decentralisation laws in Cameroon, Global Water Partnership Cameroon worked with the Kumbo Urban Council and facilitated the transfer of management of the Kumbo Water Supply system to the Kumbo Urban Council.

## **Outcomes**

The locally managed KWA has re-opened all public taps, extended coverage and introduced a

differential water tariff structure. Moreover, the Kumbo Urban Council has formally taken over the Kumbo Water Authority, and integrated it within its management structure. This has resulted in the establishment of an inclusive and participatory community water governance structure for the KWA that involves key stakeholders like the landowners in the catchment area. The KWA is currently engaged in participatory protection and conflict resolution over the catchment area. Findings from public interviews (Voxpop) suggest that there is an increase in the willingness to pay for services due to the provision of more reliable services and better communication between KWA and the population, especially those of the catchment area. There are several achievements and challenges of the current community water management in Kumbo. However, it would appear that despite these challenges the consumers are satisfied with the level and quality of service because their voices are heard and count in decision-making. In addition, the actions taken since 1992 suggest that the community is committed to an adaptive management paradigm for continuous improvement in drinking water supply governance in Kumbo. Some of the key positive efforts and achievements are:

1. Participatory stakeholder governance and gender mainstreaming
2. Water pricing: cross subsidy, water demand management and reserve fund
3. On-going strategic partnerships for capacity, financial and material support
4. Water catchment management and conflict resolution

Although there are mixed feelings regarding the practice in Kumbo especially the ability to finance rehabilitation and extension, it must be noted that under the current public private partnership practiced in Cameroon and the on-going decentralisation initiative, KWA and Kumbo council could be considered as a service provider while CAMWATER, the public partner, could finance issues related to investment in infrastructure and source water protection. Following the successes, innovative and evolving adaptive management, this case should be considered as a exemplary participatory community (municipal) water management pilot project by Government, and should consider adapting this model in other municipalities with corrective measures to address the challenges in Kumbo.

## **Lessons Learned**

This case study elucidates how deteriorating drinking water supply service delivery can trigger community mobilisation leading to a complete take-over and management of the system by local communities.

It shows the importance of participatory management in resolving water catchment conflicts and improved cost recovery.

Command and control decision-making paradigm and deteriorating drinking water supply services can be triggers for social and political instability, as well as sources of water related conflict.

Community based organisations can be platforms to enhance participatory governance for efficient and effective management of water resources and conflict resolution.

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**Related IWRM Tools**

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